

BREAKFAST IN BED

ALSO BY SYLVIA THOMPSON

THE HOUNDS OF SPRING
THE BATTLE OF THE HORIZONS
CHARIOT WHEELS
WINTER COMEDY
SUMMER'S NIGHT
HELENA

BREAKFAST IN BED

BY

SYLVIA THOMPSON



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Dedicated to

CÉCILE VON FLEISCHL

who has so often encouraged me to carry
on my inky trade in her tidy house
by her affectionate niece,

SYLVIA THOMPSON

6 o'clock

Six a.m.

Big Ben struck six; in the dark; in the fog.

At 9, Smith Square the kitchenmaid's alarm clock rang out in the tin basin she stood it in to increase its noise.

At 9, Smith Square Lady Nicholson (formerly Blanche Evelyn, daughter of Charles Evelyn, whose wife had been Alice Ackerley, cousin of Charlotte Ackerley, the friend of Queen Alexandra) went on sleeping. She slept the light but refreshing sleep of a nervous woman who had been careful for fifty-eight years not to get over-tired. She had woken once during the night, disturbed by an unaccustomed sense of windows shut (on account of the fog). But after taking a harmless sleeping draught specially prescribed for her by her doctor, she had managed to sleep again.

In the room next door Sir Frederick Nicholson slept too; heavily, snoring at intervals, for the fog affected his bronchial tubes and made his usual winter catarrh worse. Last evening he had spoken in the House on Communist Propaganda in our Schools, and returned

home exhilarated, to sleep the sleep, if not of the just, at least of the self-righteous.

Two streets off, at 11, Provost Buildings, Mrs. Cashmore (formerly Lily Blunt, daughter of George Blunt, whose wife was a cousin of Sally Jenkins, who toured in the chorus with Pelissier) again lit the candle beside her bed. She moved carefully so as not to disturb her husband, bent to the cradle beside her and lifted out the baby who had begun again that intermittent clucking that might change, at any moment, into long angry screams. She settled back on the pillow, the baby's head in the crook of her arm, and began to suckle it. In the cot in the corner Edward turned over and Amy stirred. Mrs. Cashmore blew out the candle for fear they should wake. The baby's sucking became less desperate, grew rhythmic and contented, the rhythm marked by a nearly noiseless breath drawn in on one note and breathed out on a note an interval below. In the dark beside her her husband coughed, turned over and coughed again. Lily Cashmore tried to make her initial reflex, as the sister at the Clinic told them to, for 'Baby's sake.'

At Flat 10, 120, King's Road, Chelsea, Clare Nicholson (daughter of Sir Frederick Nicholson, Bart., D.S.O., M.P.) woke holding her lover's hand against her lips. She lay still, remembering herself into life. In this dark she was in Mark's flat. She was expected

at home this morning. To-day was Thursday. Last night she had run downstairs, crying, and out into the fog, and Mark had caught her in Flood Street and made her come back. Her eyelids were still hot. Always the same subject. But she was right. She switched on the lamp. Its light slanted on the little heap of her pearls, on her travelling clock, the yellow copy of *Le Crime de Silvestre Bonnard*, the black porcelain cat which Mark's charwoman had given him for his birthday. Six o'clock. She looked at Mark. He slept gravely and solidly, like a little boy, his heavy forehead smooth, his nostrils faintly dilated, his underlip juttéd out and pushed against the obstinate upper lip. His eyelids were pale in contrast with the bronzed matt texture of the rest of his face, and the dark eyebrows above them, and the black short curling lashes. She thought that he looked younger than twenty-six when he was asleep, and older when he was awake. His waking expression was vehement and mature. She bent over him, curving her body so that he lay in her shadow and shouldn't wake. She lay watching him for a long time. Then, very carefully, she turned and switched out the light. As she settled down again he stirred, and half asleep, or in his sleep, he moved closer to her, threw his left arm across her stomach, pushed his knee under hers and fitted his warm forehead against her neck. She could feel his hair against the lobe of her ear.

His warmth flowed through her, and beat in her, as if his heart were pumping her blood. His arm weighed on her. His breath came and went, warm and close, on her neck. She shut her eyes. She smiled in the dark.

She slept with him.

THERE was a button off the kitchenmaid's shoe. (Her name, Mildred King. Age sixteen.) She couldn't stop now to sew it on. She'd stayed in bed till twenty past, and Mrs. Perrott and Ackworth had to have their tea by quarter to seven. She safety-pinned the strap, combed her hair, rubbed rouge from a cardboard compact on her round pale cheeks, and powdered with the remains of some jasmin-scented powder that Miss Clare threw away.

She left her nice little room in disorder, the blue casement curtains still drawn, the bedclothes not turned back over the pretty unstained oak bedstead; last night's washing water still in the willow-pattern basin; one black suède shoe under the cretonne armchair, the other in the corner by the gas fire. Her hair-brush lay on its back on the rug, like a beetle with a forest of dirty legs. The electric light was left on.

She hurried downstairs switching on the lights as she went. Down the chilly first staircase with its brown-painted banister and haircord carpet. Across the lino past the sewing room and the housemaid's pantry, into the world of green Wilton and warmth from hidden radiators, and silence, and white paint. She went by this forbidden route to give a good

morning pat to Brisk, the Sealyham, who slept outside her Ladyship's door.

She tiptoed from rug to rug in the hall, stopped at the table to read an opened letter left there last night. (She thought there was no harm in reading open letters. But she would never take them and steam them when they came, like Miss Ackworth did; and when she did get a letter from Mr. Petre to Miss Clare they could none of them make head or tail of the handwriting.) The letter was on crested notepaper, otherwise uninteresting: "*Dear Blanche. I shall be delighted to lunch with you on Thursday the 10th. 'Breckie' cannot promise to come as he has his cousin Alan Lumley coming home shortly from India . . .*"

Mildred went along the broad corridor out of the hall, down two steps and into the kitchen. The pipes from the boiler next door kept the room warm. Mildred put her hand on the big pipe painted pale blue that ran diagonally across the wall opposite the gas range and drew it back quickly. She put the kettle on to boil, went across the corridor into the servants' hall to uncover the canary before Rose got down. She didn't mind what Rose said—(Lazy slut, supposed to be down and at work at seven and never there till ten past anyway. But Rose can tell her Ladyship what she likes now and it won't make any difference!)

She undid the tapes and drew off the green baize. The canary was up already, looking spruce but absent-minded. He took no notice of Mildred, and began

practising his unvarying needle-thin song. She changed his water—"Won't Rose be mad!"—and heard the kettle hissing in the kitchen. She hurried back, took the kettle off, turned the gas off. Nobody ever knew if you heated the teapot first or not. . . . But mother's like Mrs. Perrott too—*fusses!* The milk was in the Frigidaire; the game-pie on the bottom shelf; a small piece half cut and broken off. Mildred picked it out and put it, whole, in her mouth. She went back to the kitchen and poured out the two cups of tea—(all very well for mother to go on at her for losing her job. It wasn't her fault if her Ladyship was 'cutting down her staff.' And something was sure to turn up. What was the good of worrying . . . ?) Garibaldi biscuits for cook and Mary, Ginger Snap for Ackworth. . . . She took up the tray by the back stairs this time.

Cook was a mountain under the green-and-pink flowered eiderdown.

"Here's your tea, Mrs. Perrott."

Cook grunted and turned on her back. Her curlers crowned her brow with cosmetic thorns. Her face, red in the kitchen, was matt and pink in bed. Mildred saw that she had slept in the quilted purple jacket that her sister had given her at Christmas.

"Thank you, dear."

Mary was sitting on the edge of her bed in a blue kimono. Mary was calm, plump, warm-skinned, oval-faced. She had a bloom, a physical sweetness; she was

like a golden plum ripened in the sun. She smiled at Mildred. The smile was a flower plucked from the bright border of her thoughts.

Mildred put the cup and saucer on the dressing-table.

"Thank you, Mill."

Mary wore red leather slippers. There was always a smell of violets in her room. She used violet talc. She had a set of silver-plated brushes given her by Jim Taylor, her young man.

Mildred knocked at Ackworth's door. Ackworth shared the big room with Rose, her niece.

"Come in," from Ackworth.

"Come on," from Rose.

Rose was nearly dressed. Trim, flat-chested, wavy-haired. A pinched Greuze. White cotton chemise and knickers she made for herself. Pink corsets. Black woollen stockings.

Ackworth had the face of a Roman Emperor framed by two pigtails. She said:

"I hope you haven't forgotten the sugar again." Even in bed her voice had a crimped and cautious quality.

"No, Miss Ackworth."

Rose, putting on her brown print dress, said: "That's lucky." As Mildred went out she added: "I like your shoe."

Mildred looked down. The safety pin!

"—and your cap suits you."

Mildred put her hand up to her bare head.

"O Lord . . ."

She was too embarrassed, with Ackworth sipping, and glancing at her with imperial irony from the bed, to answer Rose. She hurried into her own room next door to find her cap. Rose could always make her feel stupid and clumsy. But when Rose got downstairs she would tell her what Fred Basham said about her last night. ("Sister Skinny.")

Blanche Nicholson was dreaming. She dreamed that Ackworth came in and woke her up saying: "The car is here, m'lady." And she exclaimed that it was to-day she was going to Cannes and that her trunks weren't packed and she jumped out of bed in a state of agitation, which she knew must be bad for her heart, and hurried into Frederick's room and began to explain to him just what it had meant to her, having had to dismiss Greene. "No woman of my age," she said, "can be expected to change all the habits of life at once and not feel it!" And, "You won't care if I *die!*" she said. "You won't care!" But he hid his head, he wouldn't listen, and crying and shouting: "I have to give up my maid, but you think nothing of indulging in patent cigarette-lighters," she snatched back the bedclothes, and found a newborn baby . . . Clare's baby. . . . She knew it was Clare's baby. And as she bent over it, embarrassed by its newborn rawness, she saw that its eyes were grey and serious

and disconcerting like Mark Petre's; and she thought, "Now everyone will know—everyone will know, Frederick will be pelted with old vegetables at the next election . . ." and she covered the baby up again, hastily, in case Ackworth should come in. But it struggled, it moved, it resisted her, clutching at the sheets, wriggling, bouncing, shoving out its head. . . . But its head, to her infinite relief, to the saving of her reason, her dignity, her last hopes for her future, was only the head of Brisk the Sealyham, and she pulled herself together and managed to say, quite quietly, as Ackworth hurried in: "It's only Brisk having a little game in Sir Frederick's bed."

She woke.

She said to herself, out loud in the dark: "Dear me, what a silly dream."

She lay still, feeling her heart beat . . . she heard her little clock ticking on the mantelpiece. (The clock was given her by the Chamberlains as a wedding present.) The ticking of the little clock was a relief. She managed to smile to herself about the dream, although she was still troubled by the sense of wild disturbance that it gave her. . . . Such a queer mixture of things. . . . Dear old Brisk! And Frederick had got himself a cigarette-lighter last week when he was in Sheffield (but she had been delighted with it too. An excellent new design). . . . Lucy . . . of course Lucy could be very unpleasant, as all Roman Catholics can, was talking about Clare last

evening, at the Wedmores'—and saying that her brother who lived in Paris had seen Clare and Mark Petre together at the Orangerie—but Lucy enjoyed scandal: and liked to think the worst of people. Naturally in any other generation Clare's position as an attractive young woman of thirty, unmarried, would have seemed 'odd.' But nowadays no one thought anything of it. One had to realise that things had changed. 'Lucy is old-fashioned. Clare has her writing and her friends, her artistic interests.' . . .

Lying in the dark, Blanche Nicholson told herself that Clare wouldn't anyway enjoy "that kind of thing."

Blanche had never enjoyed it herself. She believed it was fashionable just now to pretend that women of good family enjoyed it as much as men. But Clare, she told herself, wasn't like that—Clare was too fastidious. She remembered Frederick's phrase about Clare. "Clare's alright! Half the time these girls don't know what they're talking about . . ."

Blanche felt sure that breeding and early influence counted.

The dream faded out.

She must try and get a little more sleep. She wondered if her throat felt a little sore. Or if it were just dryness. An annoying sort of sensation. . . . Of course the fog was terrible coming home last night. And bad for one's eyes too. But the party was worth going to. That Italian girl sang

quite beautifully. And Mr. French was so very interesting at dinner about the Migration of Fishes.

Sir Frederick Nicholson, Bart, D.S.O., M.P., who had once been Freddie Nicholson (a young bachelor in London, when a London bachelor dined, danced, called at tea-time, trimmed his mantelpiece with invitation cards), and had been in love with Lily Elsie, in love with Gertie Millar, and went to East Africa to shoot big game on account of Lise Tessier whom none of his family ever knew about; Frederick, who had been the little boy taken by his mother to call on Lord Beaconsfield and stayed outside in the carriage and a "woolly-bear" caterpillar fell mysteriously on to his knickerbockered knee and his mother found him stroking the "woolly-bear's" back with his forefinger and said: "No, you can't take it home, for they always die"—Frederick Nicholson in his brass bed, in his room with the grey walls and maroon curtains and the sepia monochrome of 'The Angelus' hung over the mantelpiece, slept on his side, one bony pink hand grasping the goffered edging of his pillow slip.

George Cashmore got out of the bed, took his clothes off the chair and went on tiptoe into the kitchen. He shut the door behind him and switched on the light. He started dressing, paused with his shirt and socks on to light the gas stove and put on a kettle. His teeth chattered. He began coughing and picked up his coat

to find the tin of lozenges in the pocket. The electric bulb suspended on its cord from the high ceiling lit the tank-like kitchen, glared wanly on the pale blue walls, on the clean rose-patterned curtains, on pictures of kittens, tropical seaside resorts, skating and coaching scenes. It lit George Cashmore's face from above; a face of Italianate beauty, grey with fatigue, eyes dulled, mouth sullen and uncertain. An eclipsed face. He had a big body, round shoulders, a musician's hands. He played just about as well as he was needed to play—in one of the few picture houses where they used a pianist now—a small draughty, rickety place off the Waterloo Road where they had silent films. He played there from six to eleven. The audience was mostly children.

He was thinking about this job as he put the lozenge in his mouth and put on his trousers and fastened up his braces. If he could get some sort of a morning job. He didn't like Lily going out again. He didn't see how she'd manage with the baby. He didn't like being left with the two other children, but the baby got on his nerves so that sometimes he wanted to strangle it. Lily had more patience. He pulled aside one of the curtains, looked out and let it drop again. He made two cups of tea—strong, two lumps of sugar each. A creamy spoonful of the tinned milk that made the tea rich and toffee-coloured. He heard Edward in the next room, singing. A batlike almost tuncless voice:

"Hearts of owk arrarships,
Jolly Tars orrarmen . . ."

And Amy's warm little contralto, joining in:

"We or-orlwoysah readee
Steadee, boys, steadce."

George went in, carrying Lily's tea. The children went on singing. They were sitting up side by side. Edward's blond mouse-like profile turned to his sister. Amy learned songs at school and taught him. They often sat singing together, Amy gazing before her, dark-eyed, prim and rapt, Edward elated as at no other moment in his long day.

They hadn't woken their mother. George stood by the bed. Lily and the baby were both asleep. Her head had drooped over to one side so that her cheek lay against the top of the baby's head. They both looked as if they were made of wax. The baby of melting pink wax, Lily of white candle-wax a little grimed with exposure. George stood wondering whether to wake her. It seemed a shame. She'd been up he didn't know how many hours in the night. And she'd only been back from the hospital a fortnight.

"Some talk of Aleex-ahn-der
And some of Her-ceu-lees"

sang Amy and Edward.

"Oh, be quiet," muttered George to them over his shoulder, and they thinned and slowed their voices, but went on——

"But of all the world's gright he-ee-rows."

Lily had asked him to wake her, so that she could get up early to see the lady in Smith Square.

"Lil . . . !"

The baby stirred. The pink wax twisted and melted into a new expression. A sleepy but malicious little pink mask. The eyes opened, ovals of bright dark glass, and scrooged again.

"Lil . . . !"

She gave a little moan, stifled as it sounded. He bent over her and touched her shoulder. "Here's your tea," he said.

She opened her eyes, saw his face, the crack in the ceiling, the white round gleam of the cup, felt the baby move and stretch against her shoulder, and said, nervously awake now:

"What time is it? Put the tea on the chair, dear, thank you. Oh, *those two!*" She looked over at Amy and Edward exasperated. "At it again," she said, smiling at the sight of them. "There's the choir again." She sat up, longing to lie back again. She wrapped the baby tight in his shawl. "Hold him a moment while I 'ave my tea." Her forehead frowned, her eyes smiled, her lips were pursed against the hundred little worries, fears, problems that crowded

about her waking. But the tea was good, hot, strong, creamy.

George took the baby in practised arms.

"Fog's thick as ever," he said.

She thought how bad he was looking, and shouted, on edge:

"If you get out of bed before I tell you, Amy, you'll get the spankin' of your life. You just stop there till you're told to get up," she added to George: "I don't want 'em up until the fire's lit, they'll catch their death this weather."

She dragged herself out of bed and pulled on her coat.

The milkman climbed the stone staircase of 120, King's Road, to the fourth floor. Outside the door of No. 10 (which looked like the unstained oak door of No. 12 opposite, except that number 12 had a Lincoln Imp on the door), he clinked down a pint bottle of milk, four pennyworth of cream and a paper bag containing four fresh rolls. He met the newsagent's boy on the stairs. They said good morning perfunctorily. The newsagent's boy wore mittens and blew on his fingers. He pushed the papers halfway under the door of No. 10: the *Times*, *Le Matin*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the *Week-End Review*. Downstairs the porter, uniformed and great-coated, stood bleary and red-nosed, arms crossed, blinking at the greenish brown veils which shrouded the familiar shapes of the

King's Road. "Not too warm standing here," he said to the paper boy.

"It was below zero at midnight," he croaked.

A bus crept past, breathing hard, keeping near the kerb.

In No. 10 a mouse came up through a crack in the cement into the cupboard of the kitchenette and began to eat a piece of ham. His daughter joined him. But Mark slept. And Clare slept. There was a trap in the living-room behind the books. Mark had bought the trap and they had baited it, but neither of them would set it. It lay, savoury but unsprung, between 'Nostromo' and the wall.

7 o'clock

ROSE came downstairs. She wore the 'morning uniform' of 9, Smith Square, light brown dress, white collar, apron and cap, with such a wooden neatness that she might have been a model housemaid in Harrod's window.

When she got into the servants' hall and saw the canary's cage uncovered she flushed and went into the kitchen to find Mildred. Mildred was at the kitchen table. She looked up with an expression of impish pleasure.

"Who told you to take that baize off, Mildred?"

"Thought it might save you time when you got down late."

Rose primmed her mouth, turned on her heel and went out. She wasn't going to argue with a girl like Mildred King. But she came back to say: "I saw you at the corner with Fred Basham last night."

"I daresay you did."

"Kissing and carrying on . . ."

Mildred's pasty cheeks warmed. Her lips smiled remembering. Rose saw the smile. "I saw you all right."

"I daresay you did," said Mildred. She went into the larder and came back with the fish clammy

wrapped in paper. "And we saw you as a matter of fact, pretending you only come to post the letters. And Fred's got a name for you."

Rose minced. "I don't want to hear anything that sort of boy has to say."

"Sister Skinny, 'e called you," announced Mildred, savouring the phrase. "'There goes Sister Skinny,' 'e said."

Rose looked Mildred up and down.

"I should say it was just as well you were leaving," she said. "And if 'er ladyship knew what some of us know you'd 'ave left some time ago."

Mildred jerked up her childish head, thrust out her round underlip, drew up her fat womanly little body.

"Oh yeah?" she said, and added, "I suppose you've got a morning off to-day? And Mary'll be down to do your work?"

Rose turned and went out, closing the kitchen door after her.

In the servants' hall opposite the canary was sounding a shrill minute bugle call, over and over again. Rose went to the cupboard and mechanically got out her dustpan and brush, and went up the first flight of the backstairs, then through the baize door to the first floor landing. Brisk raised his head and looked at her from the blue sateen upholstery of his basket. She didn't speak to him. She got down on her knees and began to brush the green carpet, beginning as usual at Miss Clare's door and working round, by

Sir Frederick's door, by her ladyship's door, by the radiator, the cupboard, the bathroom door, the spare-room to the top of the stairs. She was thinking of Fred Basham, sitting beside her in the charabanc that day they went to Worthing, before Mildred came along.

The rhythmic brushing of the landing soothed Blanche Nicholson, suggesting to her drowsy brain, for she was already half asleep, that all was well, that all was regular, that one morning was like another, one day telling another, to the rhythm of green Wilton being brushed, brushed, brushed. . . . That all days began and had always begun and would always begin to the rhythm of green Wilton on quiet landings being brushed; and that as she lay in bed and knew that the second housemaid—(such a nice clean respectable girl) was on her knees brushing the landing there couldn't after all, in spite of what-the-papers-say and the stock market and Clare and things-being-so-different, be so very much wrong while the landings and the stairs, the white-painted, green-carpeted front stairs, were being brushed, brushed, brushed by the second housemaid who was such a nice-respectable girl. . . .

That damned brushing woke Frederick Nicholson. He looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Twenty past seven. That damned noise. But his

nerves must be in a bad state for him to wake like that all the same. Perhaps his doctor was right. He needed a rest. 'People's nerves are in a bad state these days,' his doctor 'd said. "Meanwhile, take these tablets, two-three times a day when you feel your nerves are getting out of hand . . ." Better to get a bit of holiday though, better than taking drugs. He didn't believe in drugs. . . . He remembered about his speech last night. He'd put it pretty clearly. Made some of the Labour people sit up. Pity the House was so empty. But the Press would have it this morning. The thought of the morning papers tempered his irritation at being wakened before he was called.

Lily Cashmore dressed, putting on clean underthings, her brown silk stockings, her white blouse, her brown skirt. She put her old purple cardigan over the blouse, safety-pinning it in front at the neck, and her felt slippers. She brushed her hair and fastened it back with a clip. She looked at her face in the glass in the kitchen dresser and thought, "What a sight I look." Black marks under her eyes and lines coming in her forehead, and she never seemed to have time to go and see about her teeth.

Lily Cashmore was thirty now. She had a little pale charmingly built face, a pretty nose, brown eyes long-lashed, set wide apart under a square brow, sweet but too pale lips with a humorous twist to one corner, a

little chin grown stubborn since she was a girl. Her smile was gay, but uncertain and brief as if she remembered her missing tooth.

George had courted and married her after the war. He had had six months in France. They met in Ramsgate where George's people lived and where Lily Blunt was staying with her aunt and uncle, who kept lodgings. Lily was giving them help for July and August.

George and Lily were married in October, 1919, when George was playing in the dance band at the Royal Hotel, South Parade, Margate, and they lived in Margate for a year. Then he got an offer of a job in a dance hall in West Norwood and they moved to London. Amy was born in West Norwood just when they'd given up hoping, in 1928. But just after that things began to get bad, for the Talkies were coming in and the craze for dancing was going out. But they had moved to Westminster when George got the job of liftman in Plimmer Schön's New Building, and he still got four pound a week and his uniform, but he lost the job through getting influenza the spring of 1933 just when Edward was ill too with his glands.

Mark Petre got up and left Clare asleep. He left the bedroom dark, pulling on his dressing-gown as he went, closed the door after him and put on the light in the 'hall'—a space twice the size of a sentry-box—painted green and containing hats and coats, an ice

box and a drawing of a nude by John. He went through the kitchenette into the bathroom and turned on the geyser. The ice-cold bathroom grew steamy. He filled the basin with cold water and plunged his face into it, then scrubbed his face with a rough towel. As he put the towel down he noticed Clare's Temple edition of the Sonnets lying on the tiled window-sill. He knew her well enough to realise that she must have lain in her bath last night looking for a text after their quarrel. In times of emotional stress she treated the Sonnets as Holy Writ. He reflected, acidly, that they appeared to have comforted her last night. She'd gone to her bath, chill, snuffling and hostile, and came out warm, fragrant and amorous.

He sat on the edge of the bath wondering if it was possible to let things go on like this. He told himself, stooping to feel the water, that she wanted him simply as a romantic and sensual adjunct to her life. Did she ever feel hollowed out when they left each other? Or have to get through agonising minute after minute before they met again? She had so many frank pretences that her honesty, when she revealed it, didn't seem real. He found it easier to believe in her gaiety, her desolation, her brutality, her indifference—which she said were artificial, than in her sensitiveness to beauty, or her passion for himself—which she believed to be the mainsprings of her life. She had been his mistress

for more than a year now; but he had never, for a moment, felt safely that she loved him. And his uncertainty of her, because of its very unreason, tormented him. Last night he'd spoken to her again, about their marrying, giving half a dozen practical reasons, and hiding his real one, which was to have her bound to him by any tie, however absurd and conventional.

He turned off the geyser. As he lay in the hot water he noticed a new set of green glass bottles on the glass shelf, and thought how characteristic of Clare to 'spread herself' about a place in which she refused to live. He glanced at her bath crystals, her powder, her lotion, her *Doctor Pierre*, her thick pink bathsheet, her petal-soft pink linen towels, with the big C. on them, her pale blue satin riband she tied round her hair and in a bow on the top of her head while she had her bath, and which had no use, as far as he could see, except to change her entire character and appearance while she washed.

The blue riband hanging over the metal end of the towel rack brought his thoughts back to last night. He felt his panic again as her silhouette groped away from him down the street; his exasperation when he brought her back, grasping her icy hands in his own, his anger when she stood crying, shamelessly and luxuriously by the fire. And later when he lay awake, his sense that if she'd left him, or if she ever left him, he couldn't be more alone.

7.30

ACKWORTH crossed the landing, carrying Sir Frederick's morning tea-tray in her right hand, his grey suit over her left arm, his shoes in her left hand.

She put down the shoes outside the door and knocked.

"Come in."

She went in with discreet but heavy tread. She slipped the suit off her arm on to the chair at the end of the bed, and ignoring yet respecting her couchant master, put down the tray on the bedside table. She turned and went to the sash window and pulled the cord, which drew back the curtains. She shut the window. She came back to the bedside and switched on the lamp with the maroon silk shade. She took Sir Frederick's dinner jacket, waistcoat and evening trousers over her arm and picked up his patent leather shoes. She went out on the landing and laid the clothes on the chair and the shoes below it. She brought in the brown shoes, polished like peeled chestnuts, and set them at the feet of the fat chintz armchair. She went through into Sir Frederick's bathroom, turned on the cold water, spread out the green bath mat, laid the cork mat on top of it, took the bathsheet off the hot rail and spread it out ready over the chair. She laid

out the shaving things on the glass shelf as if they were a surgeon's instruments, switched on the tube of light round the shaving mirror, and went back to the bedroom. She put the grey suit ready on the chair vacated by the dinner jacket, while Sir Frederick, raised on one elbow, massive in blue wide-striped pyjamas, lifted the lavender-blue cup to his pink face. She went back into the bathroom and turned off the cold tap. She came back into the bedroom.

She said: "Your bath is ready, Sir Frederick."

He grunted: "Thank you."

She went out, closing the door quietly after her.

Mary was bending over Brisk and persuading him to get up: "Come along," said her slow honey-sweet voice, "get up, you lazy boy."

Brisk gazed up at her with languorous, but impudent brown eyes. He wagged his tail lazily against the edge of his basket.

"Come on," said Mary. "He does like his bed," she said to Ackworth.

Brisk put his ears back and smiled.

"All right," said Mary. "I'll leave you." She turned to go downstairs. Brisk waited until she was half-way down, then he stepped slowly out of his basket, stretched his stubby white person bowing it slowly as to greet yet another satisfactory morning, and pattered with a preoccupied air to the top of the stairs.

Rose was polishing the parquet in the hall below.

She sat back on her heels and looked up.

"Kim on, Brisk," she said. He came, still pre-occupied. Mary waited for him at the bottom of the stairs to let him out by the front door into the square. He vanished into the yellow-brown vapours. She waited, shivering, on the steps. When he reappeared he was laughing to himself but he seemed eager to come indoors.

Once inside he hurried through to the kitchen to find Mildred. Mildred was frying bacon.

"Hullo, cockeyolly bird," she said.

But Mrs. Perrott came down the backstairs. She disapproved of Brisk. He knew it. He ran into the front hall again, skidding on the parquet. He ran to Mary who was now in the drawing-room fixing the plug of the Hoover into the shoe by the fireplace.

"Well," she smiled, "don't they want you?" She patted him. But she was thinking of Jim Taylor, and seeing him waiting for her, as he would be this evening, in the doorway of the Corner House looking down the street for her. She switched on the machine. Moaning filled the room. Brisk skuttled out. She began to push the Hoover to and fro over the rich close pattern of the carpet, over the reds and purples and ink-blue fitted like little bricks. And her elation rose through her body and bubbled from her lips in vague soft snatches of song.

"You—arc—my—Heart's delight——" sang Mary. The Hoover sighed and moaned again.

Blanche Nicholson had been such a pretty girl and Sargent painted her sitting on a Récamier sofa in a cantaloup pink dress, with her cousin Jean in a white dress. Blanche creamy with glimmering blue eyes and soft brown hair and a diffident yet arrogant expression and poor Jean rather yellow with black hair, but such beautiful hands. Blanche had a real talent for drawing and Mr. Sargent had admired her portrait of Alice, her old nurse. But she hadn't gone on with her drawing after she married Frederick Nicholson. For there had been Hugo almost at once; when he died, at five months, of infant diarrhoea, she had been broken up, and gone to Palermo with the Van Diemens; and then there had been Clare, who was born in Queen's Gate, for it was only in 1919 after Frederick came back from Egypt that they moved to Westminster.

Blanche had been a nice little girl, and a pretty girl, and such a pretty woman; and age could not wither her and she cloyed no appetites because she didn't feed any. But she often regretted that she had given up her drawing, and went often to the National Gallery and to the Tate Gallery and to the Wallace Collection and argued with Mark Petre (whom she could not help liking when she saw him although Frederick had said that he ought to be strung up) about the Pre-Raphaelites. She was very fond of colour, especially that lovely blue which is like lapis lazuli. So the curtains in her bedroom were blue and so was the carpet, and the Della Robbucci plaques which she had brought back

from Florence in 1913 hung one over the mantelpiece and one above the glass bookcase. And her blue-quilted dressing-gown lay over the armchair which was covered with the same pretty chintz that she had had in Queen's Gate; only there the curtains had been rose colour.

When Ackworth had gone out Frederick Nicholson got out of bed and put on his dressing-gown. He took the small comb off the chest of drawers which served him also as dressing-table and combed the white and goldish hairs across his head, looking in the cheval glass and seeing, without observing, his own tall, round-bellied monk-like figure, robed in camel hair.

He took a handkerchief out of the pocket and blew his nose making the noise of a cardboard trumpet. Then he switched on another light, opened the window, letting in the fog, and raised his hands six times above his head breathing deeply. Then he raised his arms and stiffened his knees and bent and touched the toes of his crimson slippers six times. Then he lay down on his back on the floor, drew up his knees, put his hands on his hips and keeping his head and shoulders and the soles of his feet on the carpet, raised his body and swung it from side to side with 'a hammock-like movement,' listening as he did so for the sound 'which should be like the liquid moving in a churn'—of his recently drunk tea. His attentive ear was rewarded. He got to his feet, raised himself on his

toes and walked four times round the room, swinging his arms in large circles. He looked like some Holy man expecting to 'take off the ground' by an act of faith. But at the fourth round he stopped, drew three final breaths and went into the bathroom, locking the door after him.

Gusts of fog went on pouring into the room.

Amy Cashmore buttoned her own shoes and then Edward's.

"Come on, you children," shouted her mother from the kitchen. "Yer breakfuss's ready," and Amy pulled Edward with her, for he was dreamy when she let him alone, and dad was sitting at the table holding baby and talking to mother. "I've a good mind to chuck it up," he was saying.

Lily poured out the children's cocoa into the big cups with roses on them. "I don't know what to say. You can't rely on this promise of Mr. Fenwick. You never know what'll happen between now and Christmas and Mr. Fenwick might decide to take a younger man. He wouldn't have to pay a boy so much." She spooned the sugar into the cocoa. "Sit down, you two," she said. "I got a bit of ham for you," she added glancing at their grave faces. She put her hand on Edward's mousy head. "Cheer up, son . . ." He looked up at her and frostily smiled. Lily fetched the bit of ham out of the larder. "The trouble about Mr. Fenwick," she said to her husband, "is that he's all

over you one day and hardly knows you the next."

"I wish I'd 'ave took that job in the dance band," he said, watching her put a mauve-pink slice on his plate.

"A month wasn't worth it, even at five pounds a week," she said. "Then you'd have bin out and probably no prospect of anything else."

He began to eat, without appetite. "If I was getting the dole now I'd be gettin' thirty-five," he said, "and that five shillin's extra pretty soon goes on fares and the wear of me boots."

She sat down with them, feeling that she couldn't stand any longer. She watched them eat. The smell of the cocoa nauseated her.

"Well, if I get this job," she said, "that'll make a difference, won't it?"

He agreed unwillingly. He added: "Ain't you going to eat anything?"

"No, thanks." She pushed herself to her feet again and came round and took the baby from him. When she sat down again it began to twist its head from side to side and whimper.

"'E's hungry," he said.

She held it pressing its chest against her shoulder and began patting its back. "There, there . . ." she said. "If I feed 'im now I won't be able to before I go out and then you won't have any peace while I'm gone."

The baby's bleats quieted. Its forehead dropped on

to her shoulder. She rocked her body to and fro.

"I'll see to 'im while you're out, mum," said Amy.

"You can't! You'll be off to school."

Amy smiled. "Don't you remember, mum. I got a 'oliday to-day."

"O Lord, so you 'ave," said Lily. She had forgotten the measles at school.

"And May Findlay wants me to come with her to the pictures this afternoon. Can I go, mum?"

"I s'pose you can."

"Good riddance," said her father.

"O, don't tease 'er, Georgel!" Lily's expression changed to a gay irony. "I should think May Findlay can see as good as the pictures in 'er own home, with her mother putting red on her toenails and 'er father sleeping under the kitchen table."

"Look out, Lil!" said George. "It'll all go back."

Lily shook her head. "Mrs. Findlay don't care if it does. She don't care about anything. All she cares is putting a set of traffic signals on the end of her toes."

George looked up, amused and pleased, because Lily was jealous.

But "Look out whatyer doing, Ed," she exclaimed, for Edward was gazing and listening and holding his cup askew in his starfishlike hands.

Clare woke to find Mark sitting on the edge of her bed and looking at her; and still half asleep

she held out her hand saying: "I can see that you've been awake for hours hating me."

He didn't answer. He took her hand and kissed it. He kissed her wrist. He said:

"I've just been making up my mind to do without you."

She sat up, pushing back her hair from her forehead. He thought how lovely she was when she was plain. (Plain as an alternative to her achieved beautiful 'appearance' for the day.) He liked her now, pale, a little hollow-checked, her dark hair pushed off her brow, her mouth coral colour, her eyes, that seemed bluish dark in the day, so big and grey under their thin long eyebrows.

She said as lightly as she could:

"You could do without me better than I could do without you. Fetch me my dressing-gown." She watched him as he got up. He still moves like a puppy, she thought.

He brought the dressing-gown. He noticed that it was white and new and trimmed with white feathers. "More glamour!" he said. But when she got up, wrapping it round her, he said: "You look like some fantastic white bird."

She trailed across the room. She stopped at the door and looked back and then said nothing. She checked an exclamation, a sudden endearment. She didn't want him to kiss her until she had had her bath.

8 o'clock

MARY knocked.

"Come in."

Mary went into the dark room carrying a glass of hot water in a nickel stand on a tray with an écru lace mat on it. She switched on the cream silk shaded lights on the dressing-table. She went to the bedside and put down the tray. Blanche Nicholson's face looked small on the pillow. The lids of her eyes opened quickly, like a doll's. She said:

"Good morning, Mary."

"Good morning, m'lady."

Mary went to the windows and pulled back the curtains. Behind them the white half-curtains were frilled like petticoats. The window looked as if it had been painted with French mustard.

"Oh dear," said Blanche Nicholson. "Dear me. It's no better."

"No, m'lady," said Mary, going to the washstand behind the screen. She emptied the basin and rubbed it round. She took up last night's hot-water can, went out to the bathroom, filled it with boiling hot water, polished it and brought it back and set it in the basin. She put the cosy, embroidered 'Hot Water' in white cotton handwriting, over it.

As Mary took the evening dress off the chair, Blanche Nicholson cleared her throat and said:

"I shall have my breakfast in bed this morning, Mary. I think I have a suspicion of a cold."

"Very good, m'lady. Will you take your bath now or later?"

Blanche hesitated.

Mary waited, her solid legs planted on the carpet, her quietly glowing gaze bent in sympathy on her mistress. She was thinking that her ladyship wasn't all that strong. She admired her for this fragility, just as she admired her for the needlework on her underclothes, and the smallness of her shoes and her innumerable little handkerchiefs.

"I'll have it later," Blanche decided. For it would be best, she thought, to have her hot tea directly after her warm bath.

"Very good, m'lady."

Mary took the dress over to the cupboard, where the dresses hung serried in the dark, shrouded in muslin and scented with heliotrope sachets. Mary liked going into this cupboard. She liked its fragrance, its neat shoe cupboards on one side, its high shelves piled with cretonne boxes, where laces, feathers, buttons, gloves, lengths of riband and silk waited in camphor for eternity.

Blanche sat up and wrapped round her shoulders the little pink shawl that hung on the bed-post above her head and began to sip her hot water. She re-

peated that she would see how she was after breakfast and if her throat felt all right she would get up. But she wouldn't go out in this weather.

"Would you switch the wall lights on, please, Mary?" she said. Mary obeyed and round the walls three groups of lights shone behind petal-pink shades and Blanche said:

"That makes the room seem a little more cheerful, doesn't it?"

And Mary agreed, charmed by the sunrise that she had just made, pleased by the order which she had perfected, the chairs cleared, the dressing-gown elegantly fainting over the armchair, the little slippers waiting, toes outward, beside the bed. . . .

Downstairs in the hall the others were already seated round the table and Mary took her place on the left of Mrs. Perrott who was telling Ackworth that she had seen silk stockings with clocks at Swan and Edgar's for two and elevenpence. But Ackworth said:

"I don't believe in getting cheap stuff, Mrs. Perrott."

Rose was stirring her tea and picking at her bacon. She was always particular what she ate and this morning she felt out of sorts. But Mildred ate fast, munching like a child of four. Mary said:

"Her ladyship feels as if she'd got a cold. She's having her breakfast in her room."

Ackworth said this weather was enough to give anyone colds and there were several cases of pneumonia in the paper. It was very different in Cannes,

cold, but nearly always sunny. "Miss Greene and I," she said (Greene was Lady Nicholson's ex-maid), "used to be able to sit in the sun, in the public gardens, in the afternoon. And I don't think I had on a macintosh more than once all the time we were there."

Mildred dared to give Mary a wink which said, "some of us think a lot of ourselves since we've been to France." Mary's dimple showed, but her look discouraged further *lèse-majesté*.

"Well, there'll be no more sunny south for any of us for many a long day," said Mrs. Perrott. "When 'er ladyship spoke to me about Mildred leavin' she said, 'Things are very different for all of us, Mrs. Perrott, and it doesn't seem likely they'll get any better.'"

"That's right," said Ackworth. "I know several of their investments isn't paying."

"And her ladyship hasn't had a new evenin' dress this year," said Rose.

Mary, sipping her coffee, said: "It does seem a shame! When you think what she's been used to."

Mrs. Perrott nodded. "I expect it is hard. When I went to speak to her that morning she seemed quite upset, though she wouldn't show much while I was there. But I could see she was worrying. 'We've all got to economise now,' she said to me. And I said to her, 'Well, m'lady, facts is facts and I'm not a believer in grumbling about what can't be helped. . . . What is to be is to be,' I said."

They all knew this story of Mrs. Perrott's.

"Miss Clare doesn't economise much," said Ackworth. "Two *Chanel* models she brought back from Paris last week. I should imagine she owes money to every shop in London."

"Poor thing," said Mary, thinking how sweet Miss Clare looked when she was going out.

"Poor?" said Ackworth. "Poor for spending what isn't hers. It'll be her father who'll have to pay in the end, if *someone else doesn't*."

They only dared, as a group, to give little 'oo's' and 'er's' expressing their sense that for once Ackworth—however impeccable her work and however glamorous her 'experience' (for she had 'never been below a baronet')—had gone too far.

Mrs. Perrott changed from a good-natured cook to a Buddha in cook's dress as she emitted:

"I'm surprised at you, Ackworth. I don't imagine you rightly know what you're saying."

Behind her Roman-parlourmaid mask Ackworth was embarrassed. She hadn't meant to say so much. Indeed until now she'd been pleased with her own reticence on the subject of Miss Clare and what the porter at 120, King's Road had told her. But she wasn't going to be put down before the lower servants, so she said:

"I don't know why you should think I mean anything by that! Unless of course you start putting all sorts of interpretations of your own on a simple sentence!"

Mrs. Perrott, still Buddha-like, asked for the jam. She wasn't going to argue with Ackworth. She wondered sometimes why her ladyship kept her on; but she saw, of course, that she did her work well and kept the silver lovely.

Mildred spoke, munching:

"What's an 'interpretation,' Miss Ackworth?"

Mary and Rose waited for Ackworth to answer.

"It isn't any business of yours what it means," said Ackworth.

Mildred's little blue eyes bulged with resentment. But she contented herself with thinking "old bitch." As she put some more sugar in her tea she supposed that Ackworth meant that Miss Clare got money off her boy friend. The idea seemed unlikely, for, as far as Mildred could see, all the gentry had bank accounts.

Frederick Nicholson was one of those elderly cherubs who, while accepting a paunch, regret the almost too infantile tendency to be bald.

Sir Frederick admired many of the disgraceful activities of the force he liked to call Nature. He mistrusted, as being 'against' her, aperients, cold-inoculations, hot-water bottles, contraceptives, pacifists, and any methods which could give women, in childbirth, complete (not partial) immunity from pain. But with the inconsequence of an English gentleman he was often 'unnatural' himself, carrying an umbrella in the rain, eating his food cooked,

observing a fanatical privacy for all his natural functions, and using every and any tonic whose label assured him a renewed growth of hair.

As he stood, in his braces, shaking a liquid smelling of cantharides over the top of his head, he screwed up his eyes and stared at the rosy expanses of 'upper forehead' and wondered if perhaps, after all, Clare's notion, joking of course, that he should try her eyelash-grower there, mightn't have something in it! He tried to remember if she had mentioned its name and maker—but doubtless any good chemist would stock such a thing. He could pretend he was getting the stuff for his wife (just a word to the young man across the counter, 'women will try anything . . .' etc.). On the other hand, he considered the possibility without amusement, supposing the stuff only grew eyelashes, wherever you put it on.

He imagined little white eyelashes curling up out of his pink glazed head.

He put down the bottle and massaged round and round with his finger-tips. When he had done this until his face reddened, he paused, opened a drawer of the chest of drawers and took out a black cap and put it on. It fitted tight so that he looked like the funny man of a seaside pierrot troupe. Then he went to his door, switched on the light, then went and stood below the lighted electric bulb, unscrewed it and attached a cord one end to the light and the other to the metal centre of his cap. Thus suspended, he

looked like an enormous marionette. He waited, consulting his watch. He waited from 8.16 until 8.26. The makers of the 'Judge' (guaranteed) Electric Hair Restorer didn't advise more than ten minutes at a time.

Lily Cashmore said: "If only we could live in the country!"

The wish hung like a small bright picture in the recesses of her mind. Every week or so she would pause in some discussion with George—about a different job for him, some sort of work for her, something needed for the children, some extra (like that stewpan and those corsets for herself), and bring out the picture and tantalise her imagination by the delightful enamelled detail; the cornfield in the foreground, the three elms with rooks' nests in them, the winding path leading away through the corn to the wicket gate, and beyond the gate the cottage—white-washed, thatched, half-overgrown with ivy—with red rambler roses growing over the latticed windows on the ground floor.

"If only we could find something in the country," she repeated. "If we was to get a little cottage and serve teas . . ."

George had heard this before too. He made his usual remark: "You need to have capital for that."

"—and I should think we could let a room off easy enough, with all this hiking—and cyclists too. If we

was to find something not too far from the road . . .” She saw a **white** road now, a peaceful road, running beside the **cornfield** and past the cottage. And a sign—painted **green** on **white**—hanging from an iron bar that was **fixed** on the sidewall of the cottage: ‘TEAS.’ She said: “When you think what those people must **make** that give teas and refreshments.”

George lit a cigarette. “Mmmm . . .” He got no pleasure out of imagining things that couldn’t happen. And ‘country’ as an ‘idea’ didn’t stir him, for his experience of country was the seaside in England and a small section of northern France.

“How much capital d’you need?” asked Lily.

He looked at her with surprise. She had never spoken in such a practical tone of the subject. He gave her an acrid grimace of a smile.

“Awlright, Mrs. Rothschild.”

“And, I suppose you’d want enough to stock us with **crockery** and spoons and tables and chairs, but you **can** get them cheap enough at Cressets’ second-hand . . .”

“—and **silver** tea-urns and gold plates and a red carpet and an awnin’ for when Royalty comes,” said George annoyed by the tempting and concrete quality of his wife’s vision. “We might as well buy the Metropole, Brighton, and be done with it,” he said.

“I’d like to go to Brighton again,” said Amy, remembering hot sand in her toes and swishy sounding

waves fringed with soapsuds, and donkeys racing with children on them against an endless salt-tasting blue.

"I would too," echoed Edward, remembering dough-nuts he'd made, powdering balls of wet sand with dry white sand from beside the breakwater where the lady in black was reading.

"Them spacious days will not return," said George.

"The children 'u'd be better in the country," said Lily thoughtfully.

While Mark put on the coffee percolator and laid the table, Clare went through her morning ritual. She covered her face with massage cream, locked the bedroom door, took off her nightdress and did exercises stretching her limbs, breathing deeply and lying on her back across the bed and revolving her head on her neck as if she were trying to get it off. She had read in *Vogue* that this will defer a double-chin. Then she got her hair-brush out of the drawer and brushed her hair for three and a half minutes by her clock, pretending to herself that it was five. Then she put on her dressing-gown and passed through the kitchenette where Mark was making toast and thinking, at that moment, about Monsieur Paul-Boncour, to the bathroom where she turned on the cold tap and began to take the cream off her face with pieces of cotton wool soaked in skin tonic.

She didn't know that Mark, as she passed him, was thinking about Monsieur Paul-Boncour, about French

Policy, about Inspection of Armaments, but she knew that he had lost consciousness of her. And that if she had stopped, at that moment, on her way through the kitchenette and said to him that, after last night, she had decided to leave him, he would simply look at her . . . and go on thinking—about the American Experiment, or the character of Hazlitt, or his book. . . .

As she dabbed her face she caught sight of the *Sonnets*, and wondered why she had been so angry last night, and whether he weren't right in saying that her prejudice against marriage was just lack of character, an inability to deal with dailiness, a fear of permanency, a post-war bourgeois 'fancy' about independence? She wanted—that was how she'd begun by putting it—the 'two lives.' She wanted her life with him; but she didn't want to give up, as he demanded, her nice life with Mammon. There was no reason, she'd said, why she should be poor and uncomfortable, when her parents were so richly comfortable. Her own £400 a year from her grandfather was enough for her taste in life, if she lived at home, and in debt. And why should her refusal to accept Mark's philosophy (which she agreed with in theory) — (as he'd pointed out, last night and so often) that she didn't love him? Did she doubt that he loved her, because he disliked her way of life, and described her life as an offence against 'modern life' and 'a survival of the Age of Hypocrisy'?

And she didn't, she reflected in a vein of early-morning irony, respect Mark because he chose leisure on three hundred a year, rather than six or seven hundred a year and a job; although she agreed as to the respectability of such a choice. He said her standards were those of a "superbly intelligent demi-mondaine"; that she reconciled luxury and licence with weakness for tradition and respectability. That she couldn't simplify even her passions, and must elaborate even sensual delight with scents, shadowed rooms, and lace-and-satin. . . .

But if she changed? . . .

She plunged in the icy water, gasped, and sprang out again and seized her bath towel.

—if she simplified her life, and conformed (she smiled trying to imagine it) to the wishes he'd expressed about her at different times? . . . If she had 'one lovely dress and then stopped thinking about her clothes'; 'didn't bother about her face and hair because she was lovely anyway'; and gave up 'seeing people who were bred by Coward out of *Vogue*'; 'used her brains to understand the remaking of the world she'd been born in, instead of wishing everybody still had tight waists and coachmen.' Would that make him more in love with her? Wasn't his demand that she should believe *with* him, this strange passion to convert her, only another expression of his fear that she didn't love him? Or was it in his breeding, a Papist heritage, this need to impose in-

tellectually, to possess spiritually? Had his own heresy transferred his ingrained need of spiritual communion to his everyday life; so that what he demanded from her wasn't just a 'being terribly in love,' but a mystical yet beautifully everyday passion, which she could imagine, but knew she could never feel. . . .

A smell of coffee came through the door. She heard a tap-tap and then a spluttering. He was frying the eggs. She hurried up and seized the tin of 'Heure Bleue' and powdered and brushed her teeth, wondering where her toothpaste had gone. (But perhaps she had left it at Smith Square, and she hated Mark's stuff. And one of her economies was not to have two lots of toothpaste.)

A WHITE dining-room, panelled. A white cloth. A blue and white Copenhagen service. Yellow chrysanthemums that made the fog at the window green. An electric stove. The *Times*; the *Morning Post*; the *Daily Express*. The frosty light streamed down from the chandelier, giving a festive hyper-breakfast glitter to the silver dishes on the breakfast heater.

Ackworth set the silver coffee pot and the silver hot milk jug on the heater; and the silver cream jug on the table beside the silver sugar basin. Alone with the gleaming table, the shut savoury dishes, discreet electro-plated heater, Ackworth's temper abated. 'Her' dining-room gleamed wherever it should gleam, from parquet to salt-spoons, was pure white, was deeply carpeted, was richly curtained, was warm, high-ceilinged—elegant in fine. And the chandelier was her child, her toy, her treasure (its crystal oak-leaves washed with Lux and water, rubbed with silk, and shrouded in muslin whenever the family was away).

Flora Ackworth had two lives, the life of the Impeccable Parlourmaid (which she was, by such standards) and the life, supplied to her by the Library, of High and Passionate Aristocracy. Elinor Glyn,

more than any other author, initiated Flora Ackworth into a world where foreign princesses seduced young earls on beds of red-rose petals; where daughters of rich Jews were ennobled by beauty, chastity, and a title; while the still unravished brides of marquises endured not only their own virginity, but the misunderstanding, cruelty and adultery of their mates, so to win through to an orgy of lustful remorse on the last page.

Flora Ackworth moved easily, because logically, between her two worlds. For however her employers might fall short of her 'dream company' in the size of their estates and retinue, the modesty of their table, and the lack of passion in their lives, they at least confirmed—if only as a 'globe' of the world—her vision of the larger, more glamorous universe. Their silver, as it were, argued the existence of gold plate; their dinners proved the possibility of banquets; their small rituals and conventions implied ceremonies; while Ackworth herself, single, square-hipped and stalwart at the front door, represented flunkys.

Ackworth opened the dining-room door, set a weight against it, and went out to the hall cupboard to fetch the gong. She sounded it: and Sir Frederick appeared on the landing above as if he were its Genii. He came briskly downstairs. He was as punctual in his solitary breakfast as for all other meals and appointments. Clare said he never kept himself waiting. He went into the dining-room, blowing his

nose and remembering that Clare was away again and wondering when she'd be back. Clare exasperated him, but he loved her with a warmth and unreason he'd never felt for his wife. He disapproved of her way of dressing, and of painting her lips, yet was impressed by the result. He condemned her friends, but found them puzzling and entertaining. He disagreed with her about religion, books, pictures, politics, manners, patriotism; and her way of finishing off one of their arguments with a smile and an epigrammatic summary of both their points of view, made him lose his temper and behave, as Clare had once pointed out, like a gouty colonel on the stage. (The phrase had first added to his anger, and then made him chuckle.) But he was proud of Clare; as he might have been proud of a valuable first edition found in his library. Her meaning was obscure to him. He heard her beauty, it seemed to him, overpraised by people who weren't his sort. But he was aware that she had a special value—and that by some satisfying, if odd, chance, it was he who had, so to speak, brought her to light. And though he had picked Blanche for the qualities he admired in a woman, he had never felt her expressed griefs and anxieties as he'd felt even Clare's earliest troubles; her fox-terrier's illness, her schoolroom disgraces, her taut and angry endurance of physical pain. Even when the little boy had died he hadn't felt more than just wretched himself, and wretchedly sorry for poor

Blanche; and arranged for her to go away to Sicily. But when Clare, at eighteen, was in love with Ronnie Field, who threw her over for a married woman, Frederick had spent a night striding up and down the Kensington Road knowing, with a dog-like instinct of devotion, that he could do nothing at all for her—except perhaps relieve her of Blanche's company. It was then that he'd taken Blanche to Florence.

Frederick helped himself to the whispering kidneys and bacon, and added two fried eggs. He poured out his coffee, putting in two lumps of sugar as Blanche wasn't down to make him take saccharine. Then he sat down to his newspapers.

The Parliamentary Report on the centre page of the *Times* mentioned that "Sir Frederick Nicholson, U., Sheffield, pointed out that History is being taught in many of our 'primary' and 'secondary' schools by men who do not hesitate to give a Socialistic bias to their teaching, and in some cases to express the belief that all Government is tending towards the Communist ideal." In the Parliamentary Report his speech was recorded in full.

The *Morning Post* gave him a headline: "SIR FREDERICK NICHOLSON ON COMMUNISM IN OUR SCHOOLS." . . . The *Daily Express*, in large type printed across half a page: "COMMUNIST SCANDAL. SIR F. NICHOLSON DENOUNCES RED PROPAGANDA IN BRITISH SCHOOLS." Below Frederick re-read his remarks paraphrased in

heavy type and reported in small type, and set off by two photographs; one of himself at the age of forty, and the other of Trotsky in the kind of hat that Frederick was getting used to seeing on Clare.

While Sir Frederick considered the photograph of Trotsky, his wife, upstairs, tested her bath with the thermometer. (For Mary, though such a very, very nice girl, wasn't really quite used to maiding her yet, and was apt, too, to be a little absent-minded. But she sewed beautifully and some of her work, on that nightdress top she'd begun to make, was like they do in Convents—so very fine.)

Blanche Nicholson did not luxuriate in her bath. She sat up straight, small and slender in the deep water and looked like a water-baby with a head out of Emile's window. Even in the early morning and with a possible cold, her skin, and features, and charming waved grey hair had a sort of hairdresser's perfection. She was saved by the changing blue of her eyes and the wilful yet tremulous expression of her mouth, and the spider's-web lines that deepened on her brows; for she had a habit of quick frowns and perplexed lifting of her eyebrows.

Blanche washed herself as if she had been brought up to the strictest conventual ablutions beneath a sheet that hid her body from her gaze. Her speed and the way in which she hurried out and into her towel would have given any spectator the impression that

she believed the devil to lurk in the water. In fact there had never been a spectator. (But she always remembered her mother telling her, shortly after her marriage, that whereas, of course, English husbands were very considerate, Frenchmen were very different, and so inconsiderate of the privacy of their wives that all *bien élevées* Frenchwomen bathed in milk.)

Amy Cashmore ran down the two flights of stone staircase, but she hesitated in the doorway downstairs for she could hardly see the lamp-post two feet away. She remembered a picture in a book May had shown her called, *Ten Thousand Feet Under the Sea*, where there were huge tangly shapes in the dark water.

There had been a fog last winter and the Provost Building's children had lit a fire and there had been a blaze that looked like a huge chrysanthemum in the middle of the courtyard, but a Bobby had come. But Amy didn't remember it was so freezing as this morning. The cold went choking down into her body as she breathed and nipped her ears and knees and stung her eyes like ammonia.

May lived on the opposite side of the yard, on the ground floor, and Amy started out, her shoulders hunched, her arms crossed and hugging her chest, a pop falling from her pink nose. She had as little view of her destination as if she were crossing Siberia, but she knew the shape and position of each cobblestone,

the three flagstones near the centre, where there had once been a pump, the stone gutter that led from the edge of the court to the round grating where she and May and Stanley had fished for rats with sardine tails on pins because May's mother said there were rats in sewers. She followed the stone gutter which led up to the door by the Findlays'. The Findlays' windows had no curtains but the blinds were down. There was a light inside. Amy stood by the window and called:

"My?"

There was no answer, but she saw a man's shadow move across the blind.

"My?"

May's shrill precise tones answered:

"Orroight, wite a minnit."

Amy went into the passage and waited outside the Findlays' door. She could hear Mr. Findlay going on at May in a grumbling whine and May's unperturbed "orroight, Dad." . . . "No, I won't, Dad." . . . "Yes, Dad."

The door was opened.

"Come in a sec," said May.

Amy hated going into the Findlay place, but she was docile and always obeyed May, who, at seven, had enough poise, initiative and worldly wisdom to run a hotel.

"Sit down while I get me coat," she said.

Amy sat on the edge of the red plush sofa which extended from the fireless fireplace to the door. This

sofa, enriched by two grimed mauve satin cushions, 'pen-painted' with sweet peas, and a round table and vast mahogany sideboard, were the only bits of furniture in the room, except the deck chair occupied by Mr. Findlay—and the standard lamp in the corner which had a mauve silk shade and bathed the room in a faint livid light. Amy was afraid of Mr. Findlay. He was a small thin man with big arms, and black eyebrows and darting little eyes and a loose little mouth, and a chin that he was always pushing forward as if he were trying to make it live up to the prominence of his nose. He nearly always wore a bowler hat, and smoked cigars. At this moment he was lounging by the table in his deck chair and drinking black coffee out of a glass, and reading last night's evening paper. He wore his check overcoat and no collar. To Amy's surprise he hummed a tune to himself, although he looked as cross as ever.

As May returned from the bedroom she left the door open, and Amy could see the big brass bed and Mrs. Findlay lying in bed, her mop of curled golden hair pushed back from her face, which was stained and puffy so that Amy didn't want to look at her. But when she and May got outside May said her mother had been crying all night.

Amy asked what for; and May said: "Oh, she's crazy about this Mr. Hermann that she goes with. Dad don't know, of course. I wish she could get a divorce, marry him and take me along too. But 'e won't, of course."

"Why not?" said Amy.

"Because he's a married man already for one thing," said May. She explained no further, for she had an adult tenderness for Amy, whose innocence she despised but admired, as part of a nurture superior to her own. May added: "'E's very rich. 'E took mother to 'is flat once—when the servants an' all were away, and she says there was carpets you could sink yer 'eels into."

Amy's imagination was stirred. She saw May's mother, whose beauty she silently and passionately admired, standing in a huge white room and her high heels disappearing slowly into a carpet the colour of raspberryade.

"What shall we do?" asked May, brisk on a new subject. They were standing in the middle of the yard now, and May's teeth were chattering and the damp was settling in a fine dew on her sealskin jacket, and her gold hair hung lank against her peaky little face. She looked, in spite of her self-possession, so forlorn that even Amy noticed and took her hand and said: "You'd better come along to our place, it's too cold to stop out here and we got a fire. Ma won't mind."

May nodded. "Rightchuyah! We don't start our fire so early."

The living room at Mark's flat was lined with books from floor to ceiling. In the only space above the mantelpiece, hung his Mathew Smith. He had bought

it in 1929, the year he came from his architectural experiments in New York to try six months in his uncle's firm in the City (and console himself for work, which he found even more futile than he'd expected, by changing his salary conscientiously into pictures and subscriptions to hospitals).

The log fire (lit by Mark himself every morning) added to the lived-in and leisured character of the room.

Mark and Clare had breakfast here. Clare was late and came in fastening her belt. Mark got up when she came in but went on reading the *Times*. She sat down opposite him and poured out her coffee. He said:

"Darling, your father has been thundering again."

"What now?"

He read aloud from the Parliamentary Report.

"Poor father!" said Clare.

Mark was silent.

"The *Times* makes no comment?" she asked.

"Of course not. That's just the kind of thing they don't comment on. The *Times's* have made themselves a political policy like one of those shot silks that look blue in one light and red in another."

He went on reading. She took up the *Week-End view* and began to read the advertisements on the back.

"Do so many people have cockroaches?" she asked.

He said: "The *Times* reporting of debates is very

interesting. They report accurately, but they report Conservatives more fully than the Socialists. You can see if you compare Hansard."

"Really?" She thought she must do that some time. Poor father and his absurd speech; roused to defensive action by the least glimmer of intelligence. History must go on being taught nationally or children would soon learn not to think nationally.

"Father would admire Hitler," she said, "if only he weren't German."

Mark put down the *Times*.

"Hitler's the natural poet of all the rabid patriotic halfwits in the world. And even though Englishmen don't like to pay lip service to him directly, he's bucked up all the little Fascist movements everywhere—even in the King's Road."

Clare nodded. "Lovely young men with narrow foreheads and big shoulders and black shirts—marmalade, please, darling." She paused, looking at him, and then smiled. "When the English Nazis—soi-disant Fascists—get into power—(I should think there must be heaps of little business men with repressed instincts and inflamed brain cells who could lead them!)—then you'll find your vocation, darling, defying them and being thrown into prison."

"And shot?"

"Of course."

He looked back at her, amused.

"I didn't know you saw me in heroic parts."

"Of course. I see you quite, quite ready to die for any cause that was hopeless or fantastic enough."

"But you accused me last night of being conventional and having a passion for safety."

"Oh—that——" She didn't want to talk about last night. "I meant in personal relationships."

"I have no—'personal relationships' that matter to me, except you. . . . Naturally I want that to be—as safe as possible." He dismissed his own gravity. "Do you see me leading an armed force, or just plotting in pubs?"

"Oh, an armed force, and I'd do the plotting."

"But you'd be with the Royal British Nazis. You'd agree with me in principle, but you'd feel it was so important to preserve the England of Edward the Seventh, and that after all the R.B.N.s *were* the only people who entertained nowadays——"

"Brute!"

He leaned across the table and took her fingers in his. Then he said: "Give me some more coffee, go to the ice-box and get some more butter. Cherish me a little."

"Now I must go home," said Clare.

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons. But chiefly because I want to see Daddie before he starts work."

She lit a cigarette. She came and sat on the arm of his chair—put her arm round his shoulder and said: "Darling, I'm so in love with you."

He took her hand, kissed her finger-tips. "What work?" He added in a mellower tone: "Your hands smell of roses."

"That's the expensive stuff I put on them! . . . I don't know *what* work myself. Nobody really knows what M.P.s do in the mornings. I don't think they really know themselves, because each new one doesn't dare to ask the others and so each of them locks the door and invents something. . . . I think Daddie and little Tandy do scrapbooks with press cuttings."

"Why must you see your father so immediately?"

She hesitated. "Because I very immediately want money."

"Will he give it you?"

"I suppose so."

"If you stayed here for the day you could help me go through those 1850 Albums."

"I know. I'd like to. But anyway I can't be here when Harris comes."

"Why not? You've never minded Mrs. Hepburn; why should you feel more equivocal in the eyes of a manservant?"

"Harris might talk."

"To whom?"

"Oh—to anyone."

"Really . . . darling!"

She crossed her knees and said:

"Well, the day he came round in your car with those books you sent (you remember? last week—with that

life of Stendhal and the Woolf essays) he stayed outside and Daddie's car was there and Harris was talking to Cox, father's new chauffeur."

Mark, leaning back, looked up at her as she talked. He couldn't, now as often, reconcile his knowledge of her as a woman, as a creature who was emotionally subtle and instinctively wise, with these moods of quite childish secretiveness. He said:

"You tell me that you won't marry me on principle. Why, if you're living up to your principles, should you be ashamed of them?"

She got up. She was impatient. And inside she was miserable. She said:

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know! And I hate being asked questions . . ." After a pause she said: "I *do* know, of course. And so do you. It's because of Mummie and Daddie."

He got up too, saying: "Don't for Heaven's sake let us go through all this stuff again. You know what I think."

"Yes, but you only think that because you don't understand? You say I love them for all the wrong things and because they're stupid and darling and funny the same, and because I've always known them, and I can't really bear to leave my comfortable nursery. But you won't see that one *does* love people just as much for the wrong things as the right things . . . After all," she added, "don't you love me for all the wrong things?"

He looked at her. When he answered he said: "Yes. For all the wrong things, and all the right things. And for nothing, and for everything." Then he stopped looking at her and said: "But because I love you I couldn't pretend to you."

She said: "I know. And I couldn't to you . . . But that isn't the same—with Mummie and Daddie. You see nearly all their Truths are based on deceptions. They can only believe certain Truths because they've always deceived themselves. For instance, Daddie believes in the Rightness of the British Empire because he's consistently deceived himself about all the interests and injustice that really keep it going. And they believe that all good women are chaste women, and vice versa. And they believe, though the last thing they think they are is snobbish, that they really are different in calibre from 'poor people.' They think there's something almost natural in their class privileges . . . I mean 'Class' is a Truth to them!" Clare threw her cigarette end into the fire. " . . . And if, for instance, they knew that I was your mistress, it would be dreadful for them, because the only Truth they would know about me then would be that I had ceased to be 'good' and become 'bad' . . . and might just as well be on the streets."

"And you must keep them in the cotton wool you call their 'Truths'?"

"Yes. To be kind . . . Because I'm fond of them."

He looked at her with bright angry grey eyes.

"I'm fond of my family. But I don't have to lie to them!"

"It's different for a woman."

"I don't agree. I had to be just as brutal—in a way, with them about my religious opinions."

"Oh, Mark, my darling, don't let's argue."

"Would it be so dreadful for your family if you married me?"

She said, half laughing: "Oh well, dreadful . . . in a different way."

"But not so bad?"

"Not nearly, of course. Not that they'd rejoice over a Papist with no money. But the point is, as you know, that I just DON'T WANT TO. Let's stop arguing."

He came close to her but didn't take the hand she held out.

"And I do want to."

"So as to have the privilege of paying my bills?"

"No. I won't pay anything for you. And I won't earn anything for you. You're quite rich enough."

"Darling, you're enchanting." She put her hand against his cheek. He smiled absently and said: "Now you must go."

"Why?"

"Because you said so."

"Yes. I must."

He said without tenderness:

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't know."

"Stop, then."

"Yes." She stopped and went unwillingly to put on her coat.

When she came back he was sitting in the armchair reading *Hazlitt's Essays*. He looked up for a moment and said:

"Good-bye."

9 o'clock

BLANCHE NICHOLSON's bed would have been surrounded by two hens, a pig, a nigger, a glazier, a silversmith and a textile worker if she had had the fancy to summon only a few of those who had combined to make her breakfast tray what the books on home-nursing call 'dainty' and 'tempting.'

But Mary alone presented the tray, furnished by men and supplied by bird and beast, placing it on the bed table which Frederick had given Blanche for Christmas (and which was of wicker-work painted blue and silver, and had a place for newspapers on one side and for letters on the other).

The pink tray-cloth and napkin were edged with Irish lace. The porcelain service, gold edged with roses on it, had been given her by Angela Van Diemen the Christmas of the Peace (with a card, "To dear Blanche on this Christmas of Peace and Victory"). The egg, upright in a silver cup, wore a grey felt hat embroidered with forget-me-nots. The tea-cosy Blanche always used out of affection for dear old Lady Bassett, who had made it herself and sent it after Clare was born. It was white, and embroidered in green and yellow thread was the legend, 'Many are called but Few get up,' and there was a little rising

sun (yellow) on green hills. Three crisp strips of bacon lay in a miniature entrée dish. The 'shells' of butter were packed in ice, the toast was cut in isosceles triangles, the hot rolls lurked in a pink napkin, the milk jug was porcelain, the cream jug crystal, the marmalade in a jar like a miniature decapitable orange. Blanche's letters were propped between the tea-cosy and the hot-water jug.

Mary slipped the *Daily Mirror* into its place at the side of the bed table.

"Thank you, Mary . . . Would you mind putting the electric stove nearer the bed?—Thank you. And would you turn the lamp-shade more so that I can see better?" Blanche took up her letters and looked through them. Circulars—a cleaner's bill—Mrs. Stemp's Agency, Alice Storr—from Dinard (of course she'd gone there with her sister!); the Claude Hemsteads accept for the nineteenth. She must read Alice's letter afterwards. Dear little Mrs. Tate thanking for the jacket and bootees—"he is getting on splendidly . . . weighed nine and a half pounds" . . . Mrs. Stemp asks for a reference for Mildred King—her mother had been there . . . ! 'Yes,' Blanche thought, 'Mildred was really a very nice girl.' She sighed. Perhaps she had better put an advertisement in the *Morning Post* as well, about the daily woman . . . A postcard from Mabel from Torquay—"delightful walks and really mild weather these last two days . . ." How different from London just now. 'Jack is

enjoying every minute of it and they are so kind about his meals in the hotel . . .' A letter from dear 'Fennie.' She must read that afterwards. She glanced at the beginning: "*Dear Lady Nicholson. What a delightful surprise! Nothing could be more acceptable than the beautiful cardigan that arrived to-day from Debenham's. And what a beautiful colour! . . .*" An appeal from the Cancer Hospital—a sale catalogue from Tiptree, a receipt from the Art Club for her subscription—a letter from the W. Sheffield Women's Conservative Association . . .

She uncovered the egg, thinking about Fennie. Why shouldn't they ask Fennie to spend Christmas this year . . .? She helped herself to bacon. Dear Fennie would so enjoy being with them all, and she had such a lonely life now that her brother was dead—a dreadful place St. Andrews . . . Blanche poured out her tea and glanced at the headlines of the *Daily Mirror*. *FOG HOLDS UP TRAFFIC. BOAT TRAIN TWO HOURS LATE.* There were photographs for which any blurred negatives might have been used. On the other side the pictures were more explicit. *WIMBLEDON WOMAN'S TALKING GOLDFINCH. BABY DISAPPEARS. HETTY BROWN, whose body was found yesterday by the Police in a wood near Kings Morton. ACTRESS sues for DIVORCE. MISS DILYS SWANN, who won our SIXPENNY DINNER TABLE COMPETITION. PARIS FASHIONS. Monkey fur has come*

into favour again and is being worn round the wrists and ankles of Boudoir Pyjamas. The above model is carried out in White Chiffonese—— Blanche laid down the paper and buttered her toast. She heard Frederick's voice out on the landing talking to Mary. Perhaps it was about that mark in the bath that he had complained about yesterday—and she had forgotten to tell Mary—but she hoped that he wasn't being hard on Mary, for she was as obliging as she could be, but his voice sounded quite cheerful.

He knocked at the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, dear."

She could see at once he was in a good mood, for he came in accompanied by Brisk, saying:

"Well, dear, here's Brisk come to say good morning to you."

She said: "Good morning, Brisk. Good morning, dear."

She put down her egg-spoon while her husband kissed her.

"Well," he asked, "not feeling quite the thing?"

"I feel as if I might be starting a little cold. I thought I'd just have breakfast in bed, and perhaps stay upstairs this morning, and then see how I felt."

"Quite right," he said perfunctorily. He saw the *Daily Mirror* on the quilt. "Well," he demanded, "what d'you think of your old husband's speech last night?"

"Oh . . . is it in this morning? I didn't see. Well, I've only just opened the paper."

He took up the *Daily Mirror* and turned over its pages.

"Here you are! Look here . . ." He thrust the paper open, into her hands.

She read, saying some of the words under her breath (she ought to have looked for it first. He had told her last night when he came on to the party that he had spoken so successfully).

"Well," he asked, "what d'you think of it?"

"Excellent! How true, too—excellent. I wish I had been there to hear you. What a terrible thing it is to think of——"

He took the paper away from her again to see if there were any comments he hadn't read. She began, uncertainly, to eat her bacon.

"It really does seem shocking," she said, anxious that her eating shouldn't make him feel that her interest was at an end. "Dear me. To think of those children being victimised . . ."

He said: "I'll just borrow your paper for a minute or two . . ." He stood at the end of the bed reading. He said: "I was having a talk with Tandy yesterday and I've decided to keep a double set of press cutting now. One here and one at Sheffield!"

"I should think that was an excellent plan."

"Saves confusion. You never know when you want them for reference."

"Yes, indeed!"

"I expect the Press 'll have a good deal of correspondence about all this. It's a thing there can't be too much talk about. Did you notice how I put one thing?" He read out: "*Is the Taxpayer paying for the education of Englishmen or Bolsheviks?*" Puts the question in a nutshell."

"Indeed, yes." Blanche poured herself out a second cup of tea and put a lump of sugar in. "Shall you be in for lunch, dear?"

"I expect so. Yes. I think I shall. Got a Board Meeting this afternoon, and a lot to do here this morning. Tandy's coming early. I want to get that article for the *National Magazine* finished. When's Clare coming back?"

"Some time this morning. She said she was motoring up early with the Clarkes."

"She can't do much motoring up this morning!"

"No. I expect she'll be late. Shall you be in for dinner, dear?"

"I can't tell yet. I'll let you know later. I may be dining with Arkwright at the Club. I'm expecting a message from him."

"Very well."

He sneezed. A sound like a mastiff beginning to bark. She said: "Oh, dear, I hope that doesn't mean you're starting a cold too, Fred!"

He shook his head violently, whisking his handkerchief to and fro across the end of his nose.

"Cold? Nonsense. Just my catarrh. You know I believe if you didn't keep this house so hot I shouldn't have this catarrh at all. When I was a boy we never thought of having central heating. Only Americans and Jewish millionaires had it, and I didn't have this catarrh trouble at all."

Blanche knew this conversation, but it always distressed her.

"But you had it put in yourself, Frederick!"

"Actually on your account. You women feel the cold so. Why, this room's like a hot-house."

"It's only because of my throat, dear."

She was hurt. She didn't like him to think her self-indulgent. But he must know how careful she had to be. He came to the usual peroration:

"My mother had nine children and never had a fire in her bedroom until her last illness."

Blanche's pained mood changed to one of resentment.

"I expect if she had had one more often she wouldn't have had that illness."

Frederick had worked off his annoyance about the heating and didn't notice his wife's tone.

"Oh well, eighty-seven's a good age," he said. "You and I do as well . . ."

He came and patted her shoulder with jovial indifference.

"Well," he said, "enjoy your breakfast, my dear . . . I like the bacon we're having just

now. Very good. Very good indeed."

Lily put the full-fed sleeping baby down into the cradle, murmuring that he ought to be all right now, for an hour or two anyway. "Morning's 'is good time," she said to George as she went into the kitchen to fetch her coat from the door. He was drying the teapot. "And if those two girls in there start makin' a row turn them out." She came back into the bedroom where Amy and May Findlay were sitting on the floor arranging Amy's cockleshells as a 'garden.' "D'you hear what I said?" she asked her daughter. "If you wake that baby while I'm gone I'll give you what for . . . See?"

Amy nodded.

"Yes, Mrs. Cashmore," said May.

"That kid does look poorly," thought Lily. "Would you like any more cocoa?" she asked.

May coloured and shook her head.

"Oh, come on, I know you would," said Lily impatiently. "George," she called out, as she took off her apron.

"Yes?"

She went in to him herself and said in a lower voice:

"Make that kid another cup, there's a dear. I haven't got the time."

He grumbled. He said:

"I suppose this is Doctor Barnardo's." He got the tin down from the shelf.

"I'd like to give that mother of hers a piece of my mind," said Lily. "And Mr. Findlay too. She can afford to get herself perfume and *suede* gloves!" Lily looked at herself in the glass. "Oh, Lord, I'd better wash me face before I go. Why didn't you tell me there was a smudge on me chin?" She took a cloth hanging on the tap, scrubbed her face over and dried it hurriedly on a towel that hung on the line at the end of the kitchen. Then she went to the bedroom chest of drawers and got out a brush and comb and her brooch and gloves. When she had tidied her hair, brushing it over from a side parting and pulling it a little forward on her forehead, she put back the brush and, looking round in case George should see her, pulled a powder puff out of the drawer, dipped it in a box and rubbed it over her face and put it back in the drawer, slipping it under her old brown scarf. She leaned close to the mirror, wiped her face over with her handkerchief.

She put on her brown velvet beret, straight, as Henry VIII wore his. She took out the white woollen gloves that she'd washed yesterday.

"I'm off now," she said to George.

"You look all right," he said. He thought how pretty she looked. He didn't notice how much she'd changed in ten years. She coloured at his look.

"Well, I won't be long." Suddenly she felt nervous and empty. "I wonder if there's any sense in me goin'? There must be dozens that 'll apply."

He said: "Don't be silly, Lil. You've got yer references."

"Mmm."

"Well, they're good enough, aren't they? Especially the one Mrs. Dysart give yer."

"Mmm. Oh, well, I'd better 'ave a try. So long."

9.30

WHILE Mary and Rose were making Sir Frederick's bed, Rose said:

"Well, if Mildred wasn't leaving I wouldn't have stopped on much longer myself."

Mary folded the sheet neatly under her top corner of the mattress.

"Mildred's all right," she said. "I don't know what you've got against her."

Rose picked up the pillow.

"Nothing at all. Except that she's as common as dirt."

Mary smiled as she spread the top sheet. She smoothed her hand over the soft linen.

"Oh, go on, Rose, you started all this about that nary. Life's too short to bother yer head about thing."

Rose sulked. They finished the bed in silence. Mary :

"As 'er ladyship isn't getting up yet you'd better on with Miss Clare's room. She's due back this morn'g."

Mary stayed in Sir Frederick's room. She hung up his Jaeger dressing gown and put his slippers in the cupboard. If this fog went on she'd have to

wear her old coat to-night. Still, Jim was fond of it because she'd had it on new the day they got engaged. What a time ago that seemed, and it wasn't much over a year! Hampton Court, and Jim with a rose in his buttonhole, and frosty sunshine that made you feel as you'd had a glass of wine. They might go to Hampton Court again, one of these days when the weather got finer—'for remembrance.' She swept the carpet, thinking about Jim. She dusted the blue ash-tray and the piece of shrapnel with 'Oct. 5, 1917' on it, and the ivory monkey with the long tail, which Ackworth, in a light moment, had christened 'Mr. Darwin,' wondering if she and Jim would manage their holiday together this year? . . . If her ladyship shut the house in August and gave them all their holidays then . . . like last summer.

Rose swept Miss Clare's carpet, although it was quite clean. She wondered if she ought to open the windows while she was doing the room, as on other days, or if it would only let the smuts come in. She decided to keep the windows closed. As she dusted she sniffed two of the glass bottles on the dressing table. One was too 'strong,' she thought, but the other was nice and 'fresh.' She looked at herself in the glass and straightened her already neat cap. The sight of her figure made her remember Mildred's taunts. But she decided that she wasn't too thin, really; and nothing was more ugly than to be fat. Mildred never looked smart! As she dusted the low

table by the bed she paused to examine the little pile of books. She hadn't heard of any of them. The title of one, *The Way of All Flesh*, attracted her. But when she turned the pages it didn't seem to have anything about sin at all. Miss Clare was always reading, you'd think she'd get headaches reading as much as that. And she wrote, too, sometimes, Ackworth said, and Miss Greene had seen something by Miss Clare in a book, but it wasn't much, funny stuff, Miss Greene said. Rose dusted the writing table, more books on there too. She'd looked at them before—Poetry books. One by Shakespeare and one that seemed to be in French, one with a naked woman on the cover; disgusting, Rose thought, but nothing to some of the pictures you see.

Mary came in. She said:

"Did I tell you Miss Clare's expected back this morning? So you'd better put in some hot water . . . And if she doesn't come early put some more hot in at eleven before you go to lunch."

Mrs. Perrott moved upstairs and across the landing and knocked at her ladyship's door.

"Come in. Good morning, Mrs. Perrott."

"Good morning, m'lady."

Mrs. Perrott planted herself just near enough to the bed to hand over the little block with her menu for the day. She always wrote out a suggested menu and Blanche corrected it. She waited, her hands folded on

the front of her starched belt, her elbows resting on her hips.

Blanche looked through the menu: Lunch: *Eggs with Cheese Sauce, Rissoles, Baked Potatoes, Beetroot, Ginger Pudding*. Dinner: *Clear Soup, Fried Sole, Mixed Grill, Fried Potatoes, Cauliflower, Chocolate Mousse*.

"Yes," said Blanche. "Yes. That seems very nice. Only I think we might have some other pudding at luncheon, as we had ginger pudding last week. What do you suggest, Mrs. Perrott?"

"Well, what about marmalade pudding, m'lady? Sir Frederick likes that and we haven't had it for quite a time."

"Yes," said Blanche, handing back the menu, "that would be very nice."

"Very good, m'lady." Mrs. Perrott turned to go when Blanche stopped her.

"Oh, by the way, I have a letter from Mrs. Stemp's Agency this morning asking for a reference for Mildred. You've found her quite satisfactory in the kitchen, haven't you?"

"Yes, quite, m'lady. Mildred's a very nice girl. She's a bit careless sometimes, but then she's young." Mrs. Perrott decided to say nothing about Mildred's habit of 'picking' at things. She'd speak to her herself.

"Thank you, Mrs. Perrott."

"Then we'll be starting the new arrangement the first of next month—that's next week?" Mrs. Perrott asked.

"Yes. I put an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* and in the *Times*, so I hope to have some satisfactory applicants soon. What terrible fog, isn't it?"

"Yes, m'lady, it is terrible," said Mrs. Perrott. "I hope your ladyship's cold isn't bad."

"Not at all, thank you, Mrs. Perrott. It's really nothing at all. I shall be getting up later on."

Mrs. Perrott retired.

Blanche took up Alice's long letter. So nice to hear from Alice always. She wrote quite amusingly . . . "I am very well just now except that my shoulder has been troubling me again and if it goes on I shall do my best to go South before the really cold weather comes . . ." Poor Alice. How troublesome for her. Always some worry. Perhaps Acqui, which everybody said was so extraordinary, would do her good. Frances Arnold had been entirely cured at Acqui. It might be worth writing to Alice suggesting this.

Lily kept along the edge of the kerb, but even so, though she could have sworn she knew the district blindfold, found herself in Great Peter Street when she thought she'd only just got to the corner of Romney and Marsham Streets, and had to turn round and feel her way along the walls and past dim steps and doors into Smith Square. She couldn't see the church in the middle of the Square. 'Tifty-nine,' she said to herself. This was twenty-seven. She began to walk round the Square, nervously going up steps and

peering at the doors as she went. Once she opened her bag to make sure the references were there. "Three hours every morning," the advertisement said. She wondered which hours. About nine o'clock she supposed. It was usually after breakfast they wanted help in big houses like these. Mrs. Dysart had liked her to come early, but then that was so as to get the stairs and day nursery done before breakfast.

As she got to Number Fifty-nine a taxi crawled out of the fog and stopped, and a lady got out and as she paid the man said something that made him laugh. She went up the steps of Number Fifty-nine and Lily saw her get out a latchkey. She had a black coat on and Lily couldn't see her face but she looked young and ever so smart, and Lily wondered if it was perhaps Lady Nicholson herself? Only somehow from the advertisement Lily'd had the idea of an elderly lady. The lady opened the front door and went in and Lily pushed the area gate and went down the steps, stopping halfway down to try and give her shoes a bit of rub with her handkerchief.

Frederick Nicholson was smoking his morning pipe when he heard Clare's voice in the hall, and then she came in, pulling off her ridiculous hat, and saying:

"Well, old Badger, how are you?" Before he could rise she came over and kissed him, a scented kiss on his cheek and her hand on his shoulder.

"You're home early," he said, "we didn't expect

you until afternoon! You don't mean to say the Clarkes came up by car in *this*?"

She began taking off her coat.

"No. Of course not. We came up by train yesterday and stayed at Queen Anne's Mansions last night."

"Just as well, I should say. This is no weather to be on the roads. I must say I'm glad to see you. I was quite worried at the idea of your motoring!"

She threw her coat over the fender.

"Look out," he said. "You'll burn that coat if you put it there. Take it out in the hall, and tell Ackworth to get it dried anyway."

"But, darling, I didn't *walk* here! I came in a taxi."

He said: "What, a taxi from Queen Anne's Mansions?"

"Of course. In *this*."

"Well, I suppose it saves your shoes or complexion or something. Take that coat out, anyway. I don't want it here."

She obeyed.

She came back and sat down on the fender.

"Where's mummie?"

"In bed. Thought she had a cold. But she's getting p later."

"I must go up and see her. How was the party last night? Did she enjoy it?"

"Party? Oh yes. We went. But I did something more than go to a party."

"I broke in: "Of course, my dear, you made a

lovely furious little speech . . . all about how the little 'angels' are being dyed a deep and dreadful red! I wish I'd heard you."

He snapped, but with an indulgent glance: "The Press is very favourable."

"Which press?"

"Well—er—most of it! The *Morning Post*, the *Express*, the *Times*, and so on. And a good thing too. It's time something definite was done. It's all very well for you and your young friends to talk about die-hards and go kyting off to Russia to admire everything they like to show you!"

"Darling, you seem to have a sort of rhetorical hang-over. You know I've never been to Russia and don't want to go."

"Good. That's just as well."

"You're always assuming I'm a Communist because I'm a Pacifist."

She waited for him to say, and he said:

"One thing leads to the other."

She didn't answer. Then she laughed at him.

"What a jolly way to welcome me home. By serving up cold stale politics. Stay me with sherry instead. Can I ring?"

"Sherry, at this hour?"

"Yes. For once. I'm sad, rather."

"Sad?" He got up and rang the bell himself.

"What have you got to be sad about?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing much."

Ackworth appeared.

"The sherry please, for Miss Clare."

"Very good, Sir Frederick."

"Now then," he said, "out with it!"

"Not yet!"

"Come on, Clare. What is it?" He glanced at her with a keenness that existed only in his own imagination. "What's the matter?"

"Something very banal and rather urgent."

"Well? Come on, child." He smiled, pleased by the sense that this handsome woman sitting on his fence was, after all, his own daughter and not quite as wise as she often pretended to be, and probably was in some little scrape now where she wanted his advice.

Clare read this mood in him and thought angrily that she didn't want him to be too easy, because it made her feel a cad. She felt that if he was furious first she wouldn't hate herself when he paid afterwards. So she said brusquely, but with detachment:

"I'm in debt again."

Ackworth brought in the sherry. Clare helped herself. When Ackworth had gone he said:

"For how much?"

"More than £300."

"That means about £600 with you."

She was surprised at the quickness of his answer.

"Yes," she said, "nearly that."

"And you want me to pay?"

She saw that he was, anyway, angry. But there was a reserve of some other emotion, heavier and slower. She said:

"I hate the idea of your paying," and felt bored by the silliness of her own remark.

"What are the debts for?"

"Clothes, mostly."

"Gambling?"

She shook her head.

"Are they all London shops?"

"Some in Paris."

"All pressing?"

"Most of them. If they weren't I shouldn't want to pay them."

"I see."

After a pause he said:

"I paid two hundred pounds' worth for you just after we came back from Cannes."

"I know."

"And those are all since then?"

"Yes."

"I see." His tones were tant, but she saw that his anger was giving way to the other emotion, which was fear. And when he said: "By Jove, Clare, no one knows what's going to happen these days," she saw that the question of her debts seemed to him small in itself, but significant as yet another spark driven before the great fire. But as she pitied him and hated herself, she saw too that six hundred pounds, in itself,

meant nothing to him, and thought, "*How* rich They all were!" thinking of Them in the past.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to see what I can do," He poured himself out a glass of sherry. He looked at her from under his thick fair eyebrows. She saw that even his fear couldn't altogether spoil the luxury of her dependence on him.

"Why d'you pay them?" she asked. "You haven't got to."

"What d'you mean, why do I pay them? Isn't that just what you're asking me to do?"

"Yes. I—only wanted to know why you're being so nice."

"Nice?" He couldn't help liking that. After all he *was* being pretty tolerant. He leaned forward and put his hand on her knee. "I s'pose I've always spoiled you, Clare."

"Yes. . . . And sometimes I feel beastly about it. And then I—come back like this and take advantage of you."

Frederick was warmed by her smile and the sherry.

"O Woman in our hours of ease
Coy and uncertain, hard to please,
When pain and anguish wring the brow
A minstering angel thou."

Clare said: "A consoling text, but fallacious. When you had pleurisy you wouldn't even see me; you sent mummie to Crowborough."

"I was pretty bad then, wasn't I?" said Frederick, growing grave at the thought.

Clare remembered that and when Mark had 'flu she dropped the thermometer because her hand shook. She wondered why Mark had said good-bye to her like that this morning.

"There's a woman downstairs, m'lady, who says she's come in answer to your advertisement."

Blanche put down Alice's letter.

"Oh yes," she said. "Of course . . ."

"I told her you were engaged just now. I didn't know if you wished to see her later."

Blanche rearranged her little pink shawl round her shoulders and patted her hair and said that perhaps she had better see the woman now."

"Up here, m'lady?"

"Yes, Ackworth."

"Very good, m'lady," said Ackworth. (But up here! she doubted! For she hadn't taken to the woman at all, herself. For Ackworth could smell out poverty just as she could discern degrees of good breeding; and she wasn't taken in by the woman looking clean and respectable.)

As she went downstairs she met Mary and said: "Her ladyship's finished with her tray." And as Lily Cashmore, glancing right and left but not really seeing anything and pinching the top of her handbag with all her finger-tips, followed Ackworth upstairs, they

passed Mary bringing down the tray and Lily thought, 'what a sweet face,' and caught a whiff of bacon and felt a hollowness round her solar plexus.

"Mrs. Cashmore, your ladyship."

And Lily told herself, 'she can't eat me,' and went in and heard the door close behind her and she was in ever such a beautiful bedroom, so lovely and warm, and scent-smelling like the perfumery department at Selfridge's. And the lady sitting up in bed with pillows, an elderly lady (so it wasn't the young lady; she'd thought it wouldn't be when that old dragon said her mistress was in bed!) said, 'Good morning.'

"Good morning, madam—m'lady," she stammered (for she had never been with a titled lady). But the lady didn't seem to notice; she had a lot of letters scattered on the blue silk quilt and her grey hair was pretty and she had ever such a sweet face but sad looking. Perhaps she'd had a sad life, Lily wondered, pinching her bag harder to stop her hands shaking and standing between the edges of the two rugs and wondering if she ought to stand nearer the bed, or further away perhaps.

"You've come in answer to my advertisement?"

"Yes—m'lady."

"Yes. . . . As a matter of fact I did put in the advertisement that I would see people between six and seven to-night."